

THE CISGENDER TIPPING POINT

DING

ABSTRACT. A generation of feminist theory following *Time* magazine's 2014 proclamation of a "Transgender Tipping Point" has tried and failed to defend trans people's "inclusion" in existing social institutions and philosophical conceptions of gender embodiment. This half-comic, fully-serious essay takes a sideways crack at centering trans people by centering cis people in the metaphysics of gender, by turning cis people into the object of our intellectual debate and scrutiny. Instead of granting cis people's genders simply as a matter of course, I problematize, interrogate, and complicate them. Instead of allowing trans subcultural intuitions and experiences merely to count, I privilege them epistemically and metaphysically. And instead of scratching our heads all day over why and how trans people are trans, I ask why and how cis people are no longer.

Cis people puzzle me. Please don't get me wrong—my feminism most definitely includes cis people. I believe that justice requires us to treat cis people's sincere gender avowals as if they are legitimate. I defend cis people's freedom to prefer names and pronouns that reflect their identification with their genital status even though this regularly weirds out trans people. I have no problem with cis people peeing where they like even though this poses real safety risks to trans people in general and trans women of color in particular. Hell, I can even get on board with the inclusion of cis athletes even though they dominate every single Olympic sport out there thanks to what I can only speculate is a biological advantage. Whatever allyship demands of me I'm here for it.

No, when I say that cis people are so puzzling, I'm talking about them as a philosophical problem: What makes cis people the genders they say they are? What's it like to have a cisgender identity? What do cis people *mean* when they claim to be cis? Why do so many teens identify as cis now? Are cis people products of some sort of gender ideology—cissexualism, let's say? Is cissexualism a diagnosable mental disorder? Do we want it to be? Are cis people just whining for attention

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because they are jealous of us? Could they be a counterexample to our metaphysics of gender? What if your lesbian partner comes out to you as cis? What if they—my bad, s/he—would like to transition? In fact, why don't more cis people transition? How do cis people cope with the sex imposed onto them at birth? How do cis people know that they like being cis? Or do they like being cis? Is being cis working out for them? *How can they be sure?*

You might think this is all very funny, but I'm not here to fool around. Some of the dearest people in my life are cis, and I'm genuinely worried about cis people's well-being. I'm not alone on this either—even cis people agree with me. "For the love of God, stop burning things down to tell everyone about your kid's penis," pled the inventor of the peculiar cissexual ritual of "gender reveal" as one Southern California ceremony engulfed nearly 23,000 acres in flames. "No one cares but you."¹

Except the cissexual empire does seem to be existentially fixated on that oddly shaped, vaguely derisible little piece of flesh. We see this in a lengthy history of eliminatory transmisogynistic violence from Spanish settlers' systematic extermination of Indigenous trans women "for the glory of God and the benefit of those poor ignorants" to the British Empire's methodical extinction of the Hijra as an irredeemably "unnatural race."² And we see its legacy in a cascade of contemporary moral panics over gender, be it alt-right influencers lashing out at the "genderless penguin chicks" that "destroy traditional marriage,"³ or the "gay bomb" in the tap water that "turn[s] the freakin' frogs gay" but in a "not funny" way,⁴ or the soy milk that "is gonna fill you full of estrogen" and "flush all that testosterone—which is a word that means white supremacy—out of your body."⁵ Be it the #Tradwife movement's fetishization of a white suburban middle-class cishet "baking in heels" Christian womanhood,⁶ or an overcompensating manosphere trumpeting "manly tariffs" as the biggest, the greatest, the most jacked "ultimate testosterone boost" for a declining because impotent America,⁷ or Real Men threatened by the conceptual possibility of seeing veggie burgers on fast-food menus because "salad is for pussies."⁸ Or be it the "adult human female" philosopher proud to get over "left-purism" to march with Hitler-saluting, tranny-abhorring neo-Nazis,⁹ or a storied tradition of cis feminism punching down at women's bodies for a cheap shot at the political and social problem of rape, obscuring and exonerating it as an inherent biohazard of the penis.¹⁰

All of this screams for explanation: Without pathologizing, what gives rise to cissexuality as a phenomenon? Are cis-identified men and women doing okay? Is there something we can do to help?

The only way I know how to answer these questions is, of course, introspection. I know what's up with my genders: I came to know them the same way Darwin came to know evolution by natural selection—by inference to the best explanation from empirical data. I got knocked over by Newton's apple when I first experienced ever so clearly and distinctly a special sense of joy, freedom, and kinship from being in community with the girls rather than boys in school. And then the apples just kept and kept falling.

Like when it somehow made total sense for an early partner of mine to quip that dating me was like dating a lesbian even though neither of us could quite say why. Like when my fears were seen and understood without needing to be heard and in a way that mattered to my grad school friend Ke who took it upon herself to escort me to the bathroom. Like when the butch bouncer in Portland on Dyke Nite gave us the daddy-has-your-back-but-you-really-gotta-behave look as they intervened a split second before my newfound lover and I were going to bump into a thorny cactus on the dance floor. Like when five trans women philosophers in search of post-conference mischief in a Pennsylvania axe-throwing bar grew indignant at the arcade machine telling us that we threw punches like girls and had to prove to the world that girls could punch hard too. Like when I felt so grateful and lucky to be gifted that unspoken yet palpable trust, tenderness, and care that a trans woman keeps for other dolls as she—a riot of wildflowers in full bloom—tucked her beloved plushie beneath my head before gently laying me down on a windy San Francisco roof like I was some precious gem, our hearts filled with warmth and bliss under the sunset and then the city lights.

I know moreover from empirical data that I don't exist in my social milieu as a vanilla, garden-variety woman because I live, breathe, laugh, love, struggle, build relationships, make mistakes, tell dad jokes, move my body, roam the streets, deal with the world, solicit APA drink tickets, wear carabiners as fine jewelry, and relate to my queer siblings as a nonbinary tomboi theory dyke with an em dash problem who can be femme but only for the right twink. Insofar as these capture some dimensions of the social meaning of sex, they are all my genders too.

Cis people, confusingly, don't tend to have much beyond "I was told I was a boy/girl" to say about their genders, and they seem particularly hard-pressed to articulate the etiology of their cissexuality. Not only are they rarely curious enough to wonder but the few who are and do rarely go on to identify as cis. The latter is such a familiar phenomenon that sooner or later you start to wonder whether cissexualism is a lifestyle that can really be reflectively chosen. We've even

developed an entire vocabulary to talk about it. An *egg*, from Anglophone trans culture, is a trans person whose protective cisgender *shells* have yet to be *cracked*. It's an ancient cycle of life. "Eggs become chicks, chicks become hens, hens lay on top of eggs," and so ad infinitum.¹¹

How many eggs have been laid, and how many of them may never hatch? While for sure not every cis person is an egg, every egg cracked once identified as cis. As my friend Sofia likes to say, we all—and don't forget that cis people are us too—have a gender problem. The question is whether and how we come to grips with it.

So far as I can tell, most cis people put up with being cis for pretty much the same reason that most Americans put up with being dependent on cars: life is simpler if you just keep your head down, do what the Big Cis asks of you, tell yourself that it's all going to be okay, and never bother to examine it.

The philosopher in me has a tough time accepting this. In her 2007 essay collection *Whipping Girl*, Julia Serano invites cis people on the verge of questioning the nature of their reality to consider a thought experiment: if I gave you ten million dollars on the condition that you transition, would you do it? Serano reports that in her experience the "vast majority" of cis people would turn down the money. When pressed as to why, they would "get a bit flustered at first, as if they are at a loss for words. Eventually, they end up saying something like, 'Because I just *am* a woman (or man),' or, 'It just wouldn't be *right*.'" The ten-million-dollar question is a useful heuristic because it helps the cissexual mind to grasp that trans people who are more than willing to give up everything to transition must be after something even greater—something like "feeling at home in my own sexed body," which Serano calls "the most important gender privilege of all."¹²

The few times I've posed Serano's question to my classes the results have been revealing in a different way. Apart from trans students who are just happy for a free transition fund, a remarkably consistent 40% of my cis students would not pass on the offer either. That's very substantial.

As these things tend to go, most of my students over the years have been cis women, many if not most of them assorted hues of queer, so I don't pretend to have my finger on the pulse of the mainstream cis psyche. What fascinates me is their explanations. Of course, many would be in it for the money, and many lament how much being male and heterosexual would have going for them in this economy. But my cis students also speak of the excitement, freedom, and sheer fun of trying out unfamiliar embodied gender experiences, as well as all the insider knowledge and practical wisdom that they could pick up

along the way. And crucially, they speak of a more accepting cultural climate for trans existence compared to decades ago: to them, ten million dollars now feels enough to offset the material, legal, political, and social hardships of transition; it's like a cisgender tipping point waiting to happen.

If a good chunk of the cis community would in principle be open to transitioning but is held back by its actual costs under conditions of trans oppression, cis people's contentment with their cissexuality begins to look more tragic than puzzling. The fact that an elaborate system of incentives, deterrents, norms, institutions, practices, myths, and symbolisms works so hard to naturalize, inculcate, and coerce cissexuality only goes to show that it is neither so natural nor so normal indeed.

EVERY NOW AND THEN, there are moments and interactions that leave me wondering if at least some of the cis women I treasure in my life might be happier living trans lives—if not as trans mascs, then as trans women. It's not rocket science; it's gender metaphysics.

Most assume that to be trans you have to be caught in the middle of some contradiction, whether it's between mind and body (trans people are "trapped in the wrong body"), between individual and society (trans people "transgress gender norms"), or between man and woman (trans people "traverse gender boundaries").¹³ To be cis, on the other hand, is to *be*, simply and unproblematically. I have a soft spot for the word 'cissexual' because it makes sense of cis people not in terms of their cis self-identifications but by way of how they get there—that is, through this accidentally compliant relationship with a body thought to be sexed straightforwardly as either male or female, no dreaded asterisk attached. It's closer to gender identification *via* genital identification.

So, an entire cissexual institution of trans medicine has appointed itself to the *approximation* of that uncomplicated, nondiscordant generic cis mode of being—a wild-goose chase set up from the get-go to cast a whole people as defective, confused, pathetic, laughable copycats. And so, trans people whose material survival depends on cis-dictated trans medicine play along with it. "Nothing, not even surgery," bemoans Andrea Long Chu in the *New York Times*, "will grant me the mute [*sic*] simplicity of having always been a woman. I will live with this, or I won't."¹⁴

This conception of what it is to be trans/cis is on full display when even trans-inclusive feminists think of trans women as having been "male" *but now* "identifying" as women. Consider: why is it insulting to

construe lesbians as having been female *but now* identifying as women-loving? Hint: there are so many more reasons than one (call your local leatherdyke for an hour-long rant).

I think I can speak for myself that even though being a lesbian certainly involves rejecting cisheterosexual men and flouting compulsory heterosexuality, none of it is ultimately about men and their world and their hang-ups; being a lesbian is about loving women as we do on our own terms, in the ways we know how. Likewise, to me, even though being a trans woman certainly involves refusing cis manhood and defying compulsory cissexuality, none of it is ultimately about cis people and their world and their hang-ups; being a trans woman is about loving womanhood as we do on our own terms, in the ways we know how.

I make sense of myself as trans in terms of how I've come to womanhood: I was not thrown into it. If I'm honest, it was rather a last resort of sorts, an it's-a-really-long-shot-but-I'm-running-out-of-time kind of emergency measure. It sounds ominous in retrospect, but when in college my cognitive neuroscience professor discouraged us from drinking "because brains are not mature until the age of 25," my first thought was that oh boy I was not ready to be around for that long. Then I tried to imagine what that future would look like, and I couldn't see one; so it must be conceptually impossible.

As the poet torrin a. greathouse writes of trans women, "Some girls are not made, but spring from the dirt: / yearling tree already scarred from its branch's severance."¹⁵ In that way, I'm different from most cis women because I never for once take my womanhood for granted; I cherish it as one of my proudest achievements. I'm also different because my womanhood is dangerous, playful, nuanced, fearless, defiant, tenacious, fun, unapologetic, and just a bit confusing. What's gender-nonconforming about me is not that my gender expression is feminine but how I enact and embody that femininity.

To say that trans womanhood is found rather than given is not to say that trans women are to cis women as adoptive parents are to birth parents.¹⁶ This is Beauvoir's point all along: Yes, women have counted socially as human only because and insofar as we have been accepted as relevantly similar to men. *But that's bad, actually.*¹⁷ The adoptive-birth parent analogy sorely misses that last critical move. True, under the logic of our transmisogynistic world trans women have counted socially as women only because and insofar as we have been accepted as relevantly similar to cis women: just as men are mystified as the OG human in whose image women are created, cis women operate in dominant social imagination as the OG woman in whose image trans women are created. *But that's bad, actually.*

Cis womanhood did not model for me what womanhood could mean and do, nor did cis women teach me how to survive, never mind thrive, as a woman in this world. It was not until I saw myself in another trans woman, until she wrapped me close in her arms, that I began to think that living as a woman could be a realistic possibility for me. While a romanticized t4t is prone to enable intracommunity “abuse, silence, and expulsion,” as Amy Marvin has warned, even the cynics find ourselves tethered at the end of the day to the ethos that “however dangerous they can be, transfeminine arms will not misrecognize us,” for they open up a space where, in Florence Ashley’s words, “I didn’t have to think. I could just *be*.”¹⁸

Thanks to the irony of a self-identified “gender-critical feminism,” it now unfortunately needs to be clarified that when Beauvoir pointed out that no one is born a woman, she meant *especially* no exceptions for cis women.¹⁹ It’s worth saying out loud that lots, lots of cis women do take their womanhood to be actively achieved rather than passively inherited. Many even resonate profoundly with trans women’s experiences of being alienated from normative womanhood and feel more at home, more like themselves with trans rather than cis femininity. To me that’s beautifully trans, and it’s all the more telling that cis women who feel a special affinity for trans womanhood are more often themselves marginalized by colonialism, white supremacy, and the abjection of sex workers and gender-nonconforming dykes of color.

On those dysphoric nights, I sometimes toy with a flipped version of Serano’s thought experiment: if I could have been a cis woman, would I have wanted it? Internalized feelings of “grief, self-loathing, shame, regret” toward being trans torment many of us, and I know girls who would go ten million dollars further in debt just for the faintest possibility of having been cis. Chu writes that “being trans is the second-worst thing that ever happened to me,” with the worst “being born a boy.”²⁰ This is why I want us to get comfortable thinking about being trans in terms of what it is rather than what it is not. Trans girls are not cis (*phew*). That hurts only if we treat cis women as somehow paradigmatic of womanhood.

I’m not saying that it’s easy simply to intellectualize our pain and trauma away. But I do think that we should stop putting cis womanhood on a pedestal. While growing up playing boy-drag (my inner Beauvoir cringes at the idea of being born any way) is easily one of my most excruciating nightmares, being a trans woman is by far the best thing I’ve ever done. It is the reason that I have not only stuck around but found meaning in life. It has given me the true privilege of a lifetime to love, desire, spoil, adore, and bond with trans women as a trans

woman—including, not despite, how cruelly we manage to tear ourselves apart even as we try to look out for each other. And it continues to challenge me to grow as a person in unexpectedly delightful ways.

There's one other part to my reservation: I worry a lot about growing up as a cis girl. Getting by as a girl is tough already; I can't imagine how much more it would take, how much braver I'd need to be if I had to do it as a cis girl. If you look around, for example, there still doesn't seem to be a model of cis femininity with mainstream intelligibility that passes feminist muster. It's Beauvoir all over again. Under dominant social definitions, there is an irreconcilable tension between being a human and being a woman. You can be free or you can be feminine; the secret third way out is trans femininity.²¹

In the end, I think that if I were cis, I would have no one but trans women to look up to as my role model for how to live—and I mean *live*—in our messed-up world as a woman. Yet we don't get to entertain that possibility unless we are willing to construe trans women as the paradigmatic women, as women from whom “cis women have a lot to absorb and learn.” As Torrey Peters and Avery Trufelman put it in conversation, “there's an opportunity for exchange and an opportunity for healing for both cis women who are maybe looking for new ways to think about their gender that can be liberating to them that trans people have had to develop, and certainly trans people need the resources that cis people have.”²²

A liberating model of masculinity is even harder to come by. My cis masc friends blush at my eagerness to peruse the masculinity shelves at bookstores, and I sympathize with them. As awkward as it is to read with a straight face Jordan Peterson go on and on about the “dominant,” “top,” “large,” “powerful,” “daddy” heterosexual male “lobster equivalent of *Fifty Shades of Grey*”—for whom apparently a “female (lobster) will disrobe, shedding her shell, making herself dangerously soft, vulnerable, and ready to mate”²³—the real challenge is to come up with a non-toxic alternative masculinity that is nonetheless gender-affirming.

Trans together with dyke cultures have long wrestled with this problem. Here too, cis people could have so much to learn from us, if only they were to hear us speak on our own terms rather than as reinterpreted through their gender ideology.

The philosopher Rowan Bell recently informed me that if the whole masculinity business didn't pan out, he would probably be fine being “a slutty and also super catty amab femboy.”²⁴ I say paws-up for that. A brilliant insight from Bell's treatment of gender authenticity is precisely that we can't build an alt-masculinity from scratch but must in some way recycle, refurbish, resignify, and repurpose elements and styles from existing masculinities in order for our alt-masculinity to

make sense as a competing model of *masculinity*, however radical our alterations may be. That's a major constraint, and in practice it often ends up the case that what is *authentically* masculine will have to come apart from what is *ethically* masculine, creating a real practical dilemma for all masculine folks—trans and cis—because as trans existence has repeatedly demonstrated under eliminatory violence, an inauthentic life may not be worth living.

This is some tough stuff. So is trans masc as well as trans fem masculinity. "What is distinctive about trans and GNC people is not the gendered practical dilemma we face," Bell reminds us, "but rather the work we do to navigate it."²⁵ For trans mascs, passable performance of normative masculinity functions as a mechanism of not only gender affirmation but also violence prevention in a cisheterosexist world. It still does not follow that one can't pick and choose. Stressing that "how we embody masculinity, manliness, and manhood is a matter of existential choice," Jacob Hale advises that we do have the agency to "write creatively on context-sensitive paper. . . . In some contexts, such as an ftm gathering, doing drag or even just over-the-top nellie camping is often read as a powerful refusal of [normative] manhood."²⁶

More treacherous waters, as usual, need to be navigated by trans women butches and tomboys, for whom normative masculinity is outright deadly. One of the most surprising things I've learned from being on E is just how much more comfortable I've grown to be with masculinity. "It is presumed that only the most feminine of *men* transition into women," grumbles a group of dykes. "You transitioned because deep down, in your heart of hearts, you're a girly girl. That stopped me for years." The issue is that not even within trans fem worlds is there a livable niche for trans fem masculinity. "Some of us tomboys trans gals femme up, I certainly did. But often it is not all the way, nor do we want it to be. Further, many of us are at least partly, if not mostly, motivated to do so to avoid being yelled at in bathrooms, and accosted on the street."

And so women, as usual, find a way. "There are butches, and futches, and high femmes who can fix your motorcycle for you. We are not cis women, and cis women are not all femmes. We can [and] must stop pretending either of those things are true. Don your leather, put your girlfriend's cock in a cage, and take a ride on your new yellow and black Kawasaki."²⁷

THIS COULD ALL be fun and games were it not for the fact that cis people *are* a most curious lot. Enough ink, including in a new *Being Trans in Philosophy* zine, has been spilled critiquing the modus

operandi of cis philosophizing on trans people and trans bodies—in particular, the objectification of trans women (often a fantasized one, often named “Alice”) into mere conceptual games for the bemusement of a seminar room falsely presumed to be causally, constitutively, and morally insulated from the real world.²⁸

Little has changed, except that the trans-inclusive feminist philosophy that’s grown out of it has functioned to further marginalize trans philosophical scholarship by segregating trans metaphysics from a general metaphysics of gender.

Here’s an example of what I mean. In a provocative response to Kate Manne’s famed *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, Nora Berenstain interrogates the book’s perplexing project of giving an explicitly “ameliorative, intersectional” analysis of misogyny that deliberately leaves out trans*misogyny*.²⁹ Manne explains that her account—of *the* logic of misogyny, no less—does not address such “a deeply important, indeed urgent, issue” only because “it seemed evident to me I didn’t have the requisite authority to do so.”³⁰ Whether or not that’s true,³¹ Manne’s claim is undercut by the fact that she not only “still considers herself well-positioned to offer a *unified* account of misogyny” but exercises the requisite authority to “include various lengthy discussions of *misogynoir*.”³²

The omission costs Manne, of course, as it renders her treatment of misogyny ultimately counterproductive to understanding and dismantling trans*misogyny*: trans*misogyny* works characteristically by denying normative womanhood to trans women, not compelling its unwilling performance. We end up then with trans philosophical work on trans*misogyny* pigeonholed on one hand into its own special literature to be lip-serviced and cis philosophical work on cis*misogyny* passing on the other as the metaphysics of misogyny simpliciter.

The segregation of trans philosophy occurs too in gender metaphysics proper, which so far has treated trans metaphysics as a metaphysics of gender identity rather than gender (simpliciter). Thus, while trans people’s genders have to be made intelligible by the concept of gender identity, cis people’s genders just *are*. Thus, while trans people’s genders are legitimized only by considerations of feminist politics, cis people’s genders *are* legitimate as a matter of course. Thus, while trans people’s genders capture one among several dimensions of what gender is, cis people’s genders *are* what gender is.

The best justification I’ve seen for this double standard is a worry that the concept of gender identity may not, as Katharine Jenkins puts it in her recent book, “do the explanatory work that we’ve historically asked the idea of ‘gender’ to do for us.”³³ The confusing referent(s) of “we” and “us” aside, Jenkins and I are on the same page about this,

which makes the gender identity framing of trans metaphysics all the more frustrating.

Ray Briggs and B. R. George observe in their *What Even Is Gender?* that the very choice of *gender identity* as “our” framework to make sense of trans people “emerged from cis people’s need for a way to think and talk about trans people that was not too *difficult* for the established order . . . and did not require its ‘normal’ inhabitants to face uncomfortable questions about themselves and their way of life.”³⁴ Making this history plain, E. M. Hernandez and Rowan Bell trace the modern concept of gender identity to the pathologizing sexological research and medical establishment of the 1960s and homes in on its ideological role, inherited uncritically by cis-centric gender metaphysics, in hacking “cis intelligibility at the expense of trans self-understanding.”³⁵

The way I take this line of argument is a dilemma for any work that conceptualizes trans people and our genders on cis-centric terms: Either a view gets the cultural imperialism and pathologizing function of gender identity as a conceptual apparatus or it does not. Which way it is makes no practical difference; trans people get spoken over all the same.

What could the metaphysics of gender look like if it were to begin and end with lived trans lives on trans people’s own terms? Talia Bettcher’s now-received answer is that it would need to be “ground-bound” as opposed to “pristine.” For Bettcher, pristine philosophizing about trans issues treats trans people as a mere object of intellectual fascination. Such a “free-floating” philosophy of trans phenomena starts out unironically with no understanding of how trans lives are in fact lived but is ready to take everything down with it. It tells itself that it has no point of view which is the neutral which is the unbiased which is the critical point of view. And it relies on intuitions about trans people without asking to whom these intuitions are intuitive.

Trans philosophy, Bettcher argues, in turn puts trans people on the philosophizing subject “side of theory” by starting from a philosopher’s “embeddedness in trans subcultures—including my familiarity with trans discursive and nondiscursive practices there.” It operates under a “presumptive validity of trans identities” so that at least something “can get off the ground.” And it seeks to offer “life-affirming, rather than suicidal, philosophical illuminations” on being trans in a world keen on killing us.³⁶

That’s all well and good, but let’s face it: We trans girls are a greedy and bratty bunch. Getting ground-bound trans philosophy off the ground is a solid first step, not the final destination. We gotta bitch for more, and while we’re at it, we may as well turn the tables already.

It was after all not until Adrienne Rich turned the tables on heterosexuality in 1980 and transposed “why be lesbian?” into a question of “why are straight women no longer?” that dykes finally learned to speak in our voices from a subject position in sexuality theory. It was an ingenious move: instead of arguing that lesbians should not be excluded or marginalized, Rich opted to demonstrate the broad “continuum” of “profound emotional impulses and complementarities drawing women toward women” that have always already characterized women’s intimate, passionate “friendship and comradeship” with and among one another. On Rich’s analysis, what needs explanation is not why any women would love women (*don’t we all? why wouldn’t we all?*) but what has managed to “redirect” other women toward men.³⁷

Rich’s offensive strategy has paid off far beyond the ivory tower, for example, in the form of a widely circulated 2018 Google Doc—“The Lesbian Masterdoc” to those in the know—designed to help baby queers to navigate the enduring question “am I a lesbian?” The legendary 31-page text has benefited a generation of dykes growing up on Anglophone sapphicnet by gently and accessibly introducing them to the concept and reality of compulsory heterosexuality (or “comphet,” as the cool gals and bois say), complete with a worksheet featuring a nuanced list of comphet’s “signs” in lesbians—meant not to create another superficial BuzzFeed quiz but to invite “an investigation into why so many of these things resonate with you. Is it because you have a specific taste in men or because society has conditioned you to want this?”³⁸

Lately, lesbian feminist inquiry into the mysteries of heterosexuality has even illuminated straight lives in return. Jane Ward’s hilarious yet earnest *The Tragedy of Heterosexuality* extends lesbian feminist theory to re-envision a “deep heterosexuality” to enable “straight men to like women so much, so deeply, that they actually really *like* women.” The key to this—say it with me now—is “the wisdom of the dyke experience,” from “some basic instruction on how to treat women” all the way to grad seminars on how “to desire, to fuck, and to show respect at the same time” when “boys’ and men’s desire for girls and women is expressed within a broader culture that encourages them to also hate girls and women.”³⁹

Catharine MacKinnon, the godmother of radical trans feminism,⁴⁰ has recently said that trans people are the reason that “for the first time in over thirty years, it makes sense to me to reconsider what feminism means.”⁴¹ Thirty-nine years ago, it was MacKinnon’s work that laid the analytical foundation for the U.S. Supreme Court’s unanimous holding that sexual harassment constitutes a form of sex

discrimination redressable by law.⁴² MacKinnon succeeded in this too by turning the tables: sexual harassment, on MacKinnon's approach, is to be conceptualized in terms of not what perpetrators imagine themselves to be doing but "what their conduct means *to women*"—like "what *really* happens to women" in the concrete material "reality of women's lives," as grasped from "women's experience on women's own terms" rather than "some male vision of" it.⁴³

We find ourselves today at another political and theoretical crossroads. The ongoing institutionalization of a wave of trans-antagonistic arguments and sentiments globally into tangible laws and policies has marked the end of a troubled era of trans-visibility-turned-moral-panic following *Time* magazine's 2014 proclamation of a "Transgender Tipping Point."⁴⁴ In the decade since, feminist theorizing on trans issues has tried and failed to defend trans people's "inclusion" in existing social institutions and philosophical conceptions of gender embodiment; in hindsight, this is a defensive and reactive stance which has sought to make trans lives make sense first and foremost to a dominant political and cultural world, not to trans people on trans people's own terms.

If trans exclusion is lavender scare pivoted and trans inclusion queer assimilation gentrified, could you imagine if going on the offensive and turning cis people into a philosophical puzzle might just be what the gender metaphysician ordered? Instead of merely affirming trans people's genders, let's analyze them as the paradigmatic center. Instead of allowing trans subcultural intuitions and experiences merely to count, let's privilege them epistemically and metaphysically. Instead of granting cis people's genders simply as a matter of course, let's see what happens if we problematize, interrogate, and complicate them. Instead of scratching our heads all day over why and how trans people are trans, let's ask why and how cis people are no longer. And instead of humoring cis people and feeding them a comforting fairy tale sugarcoated with gender identity, let's support them in facing up to the truth that they too transition into the genders they are—not by passive socialization but through *active* self-construction.

Let's keep in mind that cissexuality is compulsory but help cis people to claim and own their agency under oppression. Let's revise and expand *our* gender concepts to include cis people. Let's make protest signs for women *and* cis women's rights. Let's think of cis men as having been assigned male at birth *but now* identifying as men. Let's acknowledge, as Peters dares to, that the future is "a world where everyone has to choose their gender," where "everyone will be trans" not just "in some squishy philosophical way. I mean that we're all gonna be on hormones. Even the cis."⁴⁵ Such is life after all: one way or

another, we *all* live on hormones; the question is how come some cis people have the luxury of thinking that they do not.

Let me be clear: I'm not saying that we should peer-pressure the cis to get on gender-affirming hormones and be merry—except that they already are. I'm also not saying that we should go make fun of cis people, drive them out of public spaces, take away their healthcare, send them back where they come from, or do physical harm to them like transphobes do to us—we are better than all that.

What I am suggesting is that if the history of radical feminism is any guide, there may be unimaginable analytical power and political opening to be gained by similarly turning the tables on cissexuality, by theorizing it as a culturally- and historically-specific phenomenon that requires special explanation on trans theoretical terms, using lived trans experiences as our paradigms. It is difficult to believe, when the thunder is loudest and lightning scariest, that storms have come and passed and come and passed. But the sky will clear, and only trans girls are forever.

LIVING ON THE OTHER SIDE of philosophical debate and scrutiny is uncomfortable. Trust us, trans people know it firsthand. But none of this is ultimately about comfort.

Naomi Scheman, who can be reliably spotted at trans philosophical talks and conferences, has shared with many of us just how much she loves—and just how much she feels liberated by—breathing, listening, thinking, and laughing in spaces where she loses paradigmatic status and finds herself on the margin. Naomi is special, as we know, but being “so close to the paradigmatic center” is indeed “a very bad position to see how the apparatus works, to get a feel for how diverse forces could push and pull one in different directions” when one’s “body, socialization, desire, and sense of self” all conspire to lead one down the same prearranged narrow path. “Clearly what I needed to do was to problematize my own gender identity,” she concludes. “Easier said than done.”⁴⁶

Trans people had picked ourselves to pieces long before the first word about us got printed in some fancy philosophy journal. It is now cis people’s turn to pick up a mirror and do the same. May they find courage and counsel in our experiences; the metaphysics of gender is at a cisgender tipping point.

NOTES

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